

[Beef Stew]

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SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: BEEF STEW.

Date of First Writing March 28, 1939

Name of Person Interviewed Mr. Arthur B. Owens

Fictitious Name Mr. Arthur B. Myers

Street Address 213 King Street,

Place Charleston, S. C.

Occupation Bookkeeper

Name of Writer A. D. Atwell

Name of Reviser State Office. [?] 10. S. C. Box 2.

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The cafeteria was alive with the customary noonday crowd of office workers. Every available table was taken. The walls were lined with men and women smoking, laughing, and all talking at once. The interior was blue with kitchen fumes and tobacco smoke.

I wormed my way to a table at which sat a thin, emaciated, white-collar worker whom I judged to be about thirty-five. He was picking absently at a bowl of beef stew, and he seemed unaware of his surroundings. I noted that there was nothing else before him except the stew and a glass of water. A rather meager meal, I thought.

"May I sit here?" I juggled my tray precariously as I had often seen Negro waiters do in cafes and restaurants.

"Why, yes, sure, sit down."

My companion didn't look up, but kept dwaddling at the contents of the bowl with his fork.

"Quite a crowd," I began, spreading my dishes before me, "Do you eat here regularly?" I couldn't help but note his tired expression, his shiny serge suit, with ragged cuffs.

"Why, yes, sure, I eat here regularly," came his tired rejoinder, hopeless as before, "yes, I eat here regularly."

"Say!" I made another desperate effort, "my name's Remington; 2 newspaper man, and a one-time accountant, that is, until the depression floored me."

"Glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Remington, my name's Myers. Arthur B. Myers. I'm a bookkeeper with a wholesale house down on [?] Street." Myers raised his head a fraction, attempted a weak smile, and dropped again. "I've sat on a high stool in the back office so long, I feel like Bob Cratchit. The man I work for could sure pass for old Scrooge before Scrooge's redemption!"

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We sat in silence for a moment. I gazed at my plate. He dwaddled at his stew. My companion without doubt seemed at that moment to be the most depressed man on earth.

“Look here, Myers,” I burst forth, “It’s none of my business, but haven’t you got a pretty heavy load on your mind?” I laid my knife and fork on my plate and looked at him. He galvanized into life.

“Worry! Disappointment! That’s all I ever had!” He digressed suddenly, evidently pleased with the opportunity to pour out his troubles to a sympathetic listener. “I’ll tell you, Mr. Remington, I just can’t seem to come out of the red, no matter how hard I try.” Myers paused and frowned, “it’s Mrs. Myers. Her health hasn’t been so good. Fact is, she’s been in bad health ever since I got this better job with the wholesale firm. Three years ago, I had saved eight hundred dollars to buy a little farm over on the Mount Pleasant 3 side, when Mrs. Myers nerves went back on her. Doctor said she needed a change of environment. So, I sent her up to visit some relatives in Maine, and it certainly cut into my little savings. But it was worth it, because she seemed much better when she returned. I think buying that fur coat while she was up there boosted her morals a lot.

Well, everything was fine for about six months and then she began complaining of her stomach. I had saved four hundred by skimping and denying myself even the comforts and necessities. Of course, Mrs. Myers went to the beauty parlor, and that cost quite a bit, but I always liked for her to look her best.

“She went from one doctor to another, but apparently none of them did her any good. I didn’t mind the bills so much, but I hated to miss out on the fishing trip the boys at the office had planned for months ahead. But as Mrs. Myers said, a trip like that would cost something, and we couldn’t afford to throw away a cent with Mrs. Myers health in the shape it was in.”

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Here, Myers shoulders dropped further, and I thought I detected a despondent sigh. Then he brightened momentarily. He continued: "Mrs. Myers perked up some after that, and I felt sure we were going to come out on top when her feet began giving her trouble. Some of her girl-friends were going to White Sulphur, and suggested that she accompany them. I felt that the baths might turn the trick, and they did. Of course, I had to cut down again on my expenses. I needed some clothes and I've been having sharp pains in my chest, but I had set my heart on that little place across the river where I could work out in the fresh air and sunshine, so I just strained a point to do without anything I just didn't have to have.

"The trip worked wonders all right, and I was just about to the place where I could start talking with the real estate man, when Mrs. Myers got down again. She felt that if she could spend the winter with some friends in Miami she would feel better.

"I couldn't get away from the office, so I sent her on alone. But it sure cost a lot to spend the winter in Florida. I've found that out. Mrs. Myers wrote me that the horse racing was exciting, and that she had won 1500 dollars on one horse and lost it on another. I sure wish she had sent that fifteen hundred back, or brought it on home. I could have almost paid for that place with that much. But Mrs. Myers always did like excitement. Always seemed to do her good. Of course, I had to cancel my plans to take the place, and it hurt because I certainly had my heart set on it that time."

Again, Myers head dropped. He lifted a forkful of stew almost to his mouth, then let it drop back.

"Seems like I'm not hungry anymore, sort of lost my appetite."

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He sat quiet for a moment studying, then, "If only Mrs. Myers could hold up a few months longer, then I could get that little place and we could be out in the fresh air and sunshine, and I could work in my garden in the evenings when I come home from the office. I always

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wanted a home. We live in a little apartment up on Broad street, but I get my breakfast at Joe's Place, just a hot dog or a cup of coffee. You see its hard on Mrs. Myers to have to get up and fix breakfast, especially when she doesn't get to sleep until so late at night. She listens to the radio and reads until midnight. Says she's nervous and can't sleep. So I never bother her in the mornings, but just get up and go out quietly so as not to disturb her."

Myers glanced up and rose from his chair, a bit unsteadily I thought. He fumbled in his pockets a moment and turned red. "Haven't a cigarette have you, Mister Remington? I....er....sort of had to cut down on smoking, the expense and all." He flushed painfully as he took the proffered cigarette and mumbled an embarrassed thanks. Turning he glanced towards the street.

"Oh, here comes Mrs. Myers now," he said. "She always drops in town for the matinee. Says it soothes her nerves to sit in a theater for a couple of hours each day."

"I want you to meet Mrs. Myers, Mr. Remington. He introduced us. She's looking much better now. I just hope that she'll continue. Maybe, if everything comes along all right, I can make a substantial down-payment on that place by fall. I certainly hope so."

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Mrs. Myers flounced up to her stoop-shouldered husband with an alacrity that spelled anything but ill-health. She was a florid blond with defiant eyes.

"Arthur, you know it racks my nerves to be kept waiting! I told you distinctly that I would meet you at Kresses at one o'clock. You just simply try to worry me." She snatched Myers by the arm and propelled him out the door in a manner worthy of a saloon bouncer. I was left standing, my napkin in my collar, a knife in my hand, and a dinner untouched before me.

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It was some little time before I saw Myers again. But one day I entered the cafeteria at the noon hour and glanced about, half hoping I would see him. I did. At a table against the wall sat the stooped, dejected figure with the beef stew. I rushed to his table.

"Well! Well! If it isn't Myers! How are you? Say, I'm glad to see you looking so much better!" But my salutation fell flat. I was astounded to see the change in him. His face had shrunk and the cheek bones stood out frightfully. His skin had that sallow, fish-belly color that spoke T. B. better than any diagnosis. He coughed as he looked up.

"Hello, Remington. Glad to see you. Sit down." he attempted a smile, but it was a half-hearted effort. He coughed again and put his hand to his chest. "Hurts something awful," he said in a husky tone, "I ought to go see a doctor, but it cost so much especially since Mrs. Myers has had a relapse!

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"What again!" "Myers, look here. You go to a doctor in the morning and let him look you over."

"Oh, I'd be alright if I could get out in the sunshine and fresh air, like we were talking about. But I don't see now how I'm going to be able to do it. Mrs. Myers has been having awful pains, and I'm afraid I'm going to have to send her to Baltimore to John Hopkins. She is rather delicate, Mrs. Myers is, Mr. Remington. I had often thought that she might improve if she had a child. I love children," This almost wistfully, "I really do. But of course, that's out of the question now. Mrs. Myers says it was terrible of me to ever think of such a thing considering her health and condition. But I think children sort of make life worth living, don't you, Mr. Remington?"